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Viewing cable 08RIYADH371, EP CLERIC,S CALLS FOR OPPOSITION GO UNHEEDED

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- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
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If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#08RIYADH371**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08RIYADH371	2008-03-05 12:59	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Riyadh

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/06/22/116306/wikileaks-saudi-crackdown-on-shiites.html>

VZCZCXYZ2664

PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHRH #0371/01 0651259
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 051259Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7890
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L RIYADH 000371

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/04/2018

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SUBJECT: EP CLERIC,S CALLS FOR OPPOSITION GO UNHEEDED
(C-CT7-00989)

REF: A. 06 RIYADH 003889

IB. 06 RIYADH 3720

IC. 08 RIYADH 121

Classified By: Consul General John Kincannon for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On January 18, 2008, in conjunction with local Ashura commemorations, Qatif-based Shi'a cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr called for the formation of a "Righteous Opposition Front" to combat social corruption, the "religious clergy," and political injustice against Shi'a citizens in Saudi Arabia. Though noted for his regularly strident language, al-Nimr's calls to "fight and condemn those who prevent us from practicing our faith" were extreme by even his standard and turned heads throughout the Eastern Province. Over a month after al-Nimr's speech, there has been no discernible support for the Sheikh's comments. Post contacts believe this is in part due to prominent sheikh Hassan al-Saffar's public urging of Saudi Shi'a to ignore al-Nimr's instigation and continue working within the institutions of the current state and regime. In addition, al-Nimr reportedly received a visit from Saudi Ministry of Interior officials after his remarks. While most local observers surmise that al-Nimr is too marginal a figure to catalyze a significant opposition movement, some caution that his words are piquing the interest of young men disaffected by a perceived lack of progress for the Saudi Shi'a. END SUMMARY.

CALL FOR CREATION OF A "RIGHTEOUS OPPOSITION FRONT"

¶2. (C) The celebration of Ashura plays an important socio-religious role in Shi'a communities, not only as a spiritual event, but additionally as an occasion to renew and unify Shi'a identity. This is particularly true for the Shi'a population of the Eastern Province (EP), as Ashura provides a way to assert community identity against the omnipresent overlay of Sunni governing institutions in Saudi Arabia. Using Hussein's martyrdom at the hands of tyrants as a foundation, in a January 18th (9 Muharram) speech, Qatif sheikh Nimr al-Nimr called for the creation of a "Righteous Opposition Front" that would "fight and condemn those who prevent us from practicing our faith." In a nearly half-hour long speech, the cleric said that courage and bravery are essential factors to fight oppression, tyranny and corruption, and asked, "How long will we continue to be victims and targets?" Invoking the EP Shi'a uprising of 1979 - sparked when the SAG violently prevented Ashura celebrations - al-Nimr stated that those who do not stand up in the face of aggression are destined for the fires of hell. He added that this "wise" opposition front must be led by learned men of religion, and that he would be the "first man to put his name forward..."

EFFECT OF HIS WORDS, AL-NIMR'S PLACE IN EP HEIRARCHY

¶3. (C) Although al-Nimr's words caused a stir in the broader Shi'a community of the Eastern Province, they do not seem to have engendered any significant measure of support. Most observers feel that al-Nimr's impassioned calls for confrontation will go unheeded for two primary reasons, his marginality relative to the true leaders of the EP Shi'a, and SAG monitoring of the situation.

¶4. (C) Despite previous reporting implying a connection between Nimr al-Nimr and Saudi Hezbollah, post has reassessed his role based on new information from contacts. Post now regards him as being a hard-line, independent actor, not directly affiliated with either the Shirazi or Hezbollah movements. While the al-Nimr name is well-known within Qatif community, it is Sheikh Hassan al-Nimr, a distant familial relation to Nimr al-Nimr, who enjoys greater recognition and importance in the EP hierarchy. Hassan was one of the religious leaders of the Saudi Hezbollah movement (Reftel A), and has participated in at least one previous National

Dialogue session with the royal court. Nimr al-Nimr derives his more limited following not from a broad political or religious following, but rather from the village of Awamiyya, known jokingly in the local community as "Little Fallujah," a reflection of its reputation as the roughest and most violence-prone village of the Qatif-area. Nimr al-Nimr serves as Imam in an Awamiyya mosque, and it was in the Karbala Square area of the village that he delivered this speech.

¶ 15. (C) In addition to his limited constituency, Nimr al-Nimr's message was quickly and significantly undercut by Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, the leader of the Shirazis, when al-Saffar publicly rebutted al-Nimr's opposition movement by calling for Saudi Shi'a to continue to non-violently work with the mechanisms of the state to achieve reform (NOTE: Al-Saffar and Munir al-Khabaz are widely regarded as two of the most influential Sheikhs in the EP. Al-Saffar is the most widely followed "political" Sheikh, while al-Khabaz is primarily apolitical, but is perceived as having great potential to ascend the Shi'a religious hierarchy. Additionally, contacts inform post that al-Khabaz is a Sayid, a direct descendent of the Prophet Mohammad. END NOTE). Since returning from exile in the mid-90s, Al-Saffar and the Islamic Reform Movement, also known as the Shirazis, have supported working with the Saudi regime to achieve Shi'a political goals, putting them at odds with Nimr al-Nimr. It was the Shirazis who negotiated with King Fahd in 1993 for the return to the Kingdom of all Saudi Shi'a exiles, and the last 15 years have only seen the group consolidate its position of power within the community.

¶ 16. (C) As evidenced by a 2006 incident in which Nimr al-Nimr was detained for four days upon entering Saudi Arabia after a short trip to Bahrain, the SAG closely watches the firebrand cleric (Reftel B). Many local observers were surprised that al-Nimr did not go to jail for his call to action, but multiple Post contacts report that soon after his Ashura speech al-Nimr received a visit from an official from the General Intelligence arm of the Ministry of Interior (Mabahith). The Mabahith supposedly told al-Nimr to end his calls for opposition or the SAG would act against him. There has been little public mention of al-Nimr or his opposition movement since his 9 Muharram speech.

FEARS THAT AL-NIMR MAY REACH DISAFFECTED YOUTH

¶ 17. (C) While most observers were confident that al-Nimr's words would not amount to much, some did express concern that, in addition to his core supporters in the Awamiyya community, al-Nimr's zealotry would entice young people disaffected by a perceived lack of progress in gaining greater rights. Dr. Sadek al-Jubran, commenting on the small clashes that occurred in the Rumailah village of al-Ahsa as a result of SAG repression of this year's Ashura, said that men such as those involved in Rumailah were encouraged by al-Nimr's talk of opposition (Reftel C). Al-Jubran, a Shirazi and one of the leaders of the Hasawi Shi'a community, argued that al-Nimr is not as marginalized as others believe, and that in the face of stagnating rights and increased economic pressures, people might respond to the fervor of his words.

¶ 18. (C) COMMENT: Al-Jubran's argument is supported by the fact that in July of 2007, Sheikh al-Nimr led a delegation from Awamiyya in a meeting with Jiluwi bin Abdulaziz bin Musaad, Deputy Emir of the Eastern Province. Al-Nimr participated in this meeting to discuss issues of poverty and housing in Awamiyya, and gained media coverage throughout the Shi'a community. Likewise, al-Jubran's argument about external pressures affecting political/religious ideology is supported by the slight resurgence of Sa'ad al-Faqih, the London-based Salafi whose anti-SAG message has been linked to two recent mosque demonstrations. Some believe that al-Faqih's message has regained a niche inside the Kingdom thanks to economic problems such as inflation (Reftel D). While it is unclear

how much support al-Nimr might garner among disaffected Shi'a or what may happen if the feeling of stagnancy continues and/or grows, it is clear that for now the most prominent voices in the EP Shi'a community believe it is in their interest to work with the SAG, and reject calls that may lead to conflict. END COMMENT.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)
FRAKER